

COLORADO SPRINGS



GAZETTE TELEGRAPH

CITY
REGION
STATE

NEWS

SUNDAY, FEB. 14, 1993

GAZETTE TELEGRAPH

★ SECTION B

CITY

Citizens Project founders tap public interest

Newsletter reaches 5,000 people

By D'Arcy Fallon
Gazette Telegraph

Tired but wired, Amy Divine, curly-haired co-founder of Citizens Project, sits on the couch in her Cedar Heights home answering questions from a New York journalist.

Her lanky, bearded husband, Douglas Triggs, hovers nearby, talking on the phone with a KOA-radio reporter.

It is 1 a.m.

Divine watches Triggs and thinks: What have we gotten ourselves into?

Plenty. In between the midnight interviews and the 9 a.m. newsletter-assembling parties, one thing is clear: Citizens Project, a privately funded group formed nine months ago to monitor conservative religious groups in Colorado Springs, has taken on a life of its own.

It has touched a nerve in this city, polarized since the passage of Amendment 2. Some believe

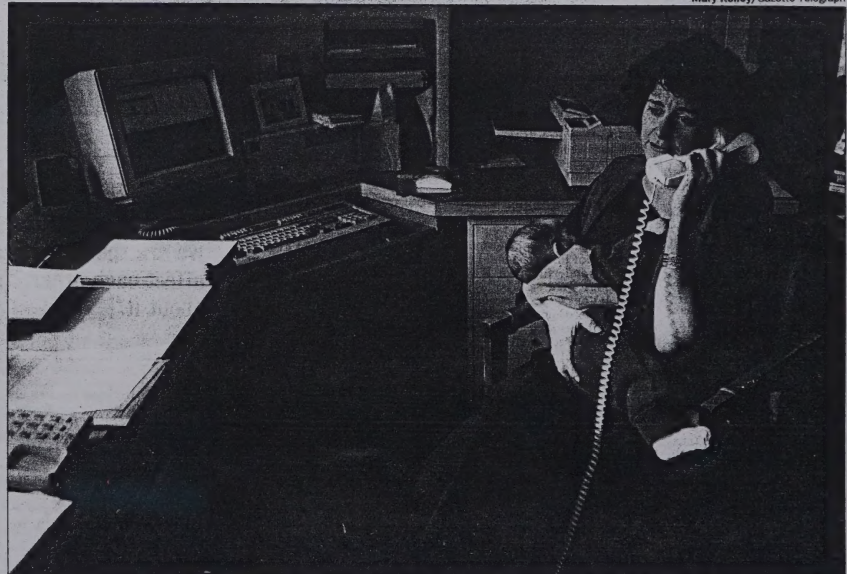
"celebrate diversity" is just the latest in a long line of politically correct bumper stickers. But for the 5,000 people on Citizens Project's mailing list, it's a way to promote tolerance in a city wracked by ill-feeling, distrust and widely publicized boycotts.

Its mission, stated on the front page of its newsletter, is to maintain the "traditional American values of separation of church and state, freedom of religion and speech, pluralism, individuality, and tolerance and compassion for others."

Citizens Project has filled a void for a certain segment of the community, says Mary Ellen McNally, a project supporter and former city councilwoman who describes herself as a moderate Republican.

It has "provided a voice for alternate ways of viewing life,

See CITIZENS PROJECT/B12



Mary Kelley/Gazette Telegraph

Amy Divine answers the phone for Citizens Project out of the first floor of her home while nursing her 4-month-old son, Tucker. Divine, along with her husband, Douglas Triggs, founded Citizens

Project nine months ago. The couple plan seminars, interview city council candidates, publish a newsletter and answer as many as 50 phone calls a day.

Citizens Project/Group aims to promote diversity

From B1
of viewing social issues that affect the community," she says.

The group provides much-needed balance in a city that has more than 60 Christian organizations, many of which have located here in the past few years, says another supporter, Mary Grant-Barnes.

"I have this feeling that these groups will infiltrate — no, that's too strong a word — but become so involved with school boards and city and county boards and commissions. I have no doubt that that will happen. Which is just fine. But there needs to be balance. If we're touting tolerance, it has to work on both sides."

The organization could ultimately accomplish what neither the city's embattled Human Relations Commission or the Chamber of Commerce's Diversity Committee has. It could shake people out of their apathy, says Jim Musante, a member of both groups and a supporter of Citizens Project. Unlike those groups, Citizens Project is beholden to no one.

"There is some consciousness-raising going on, to use an old term from the '60s," says Musante. "I think that's a very good, very good."

Critics say group adds to tensions in community

But critics contend Citizens Project — by its own definition a watch dog — divides rather than unifies. The group's much-vaunted tolerance and appreciation of diversity apply only to people who agree with them, they say.

"Tolerance is a two-way street," says Will Perkins, a car dealer and spokesman for Colorado for Family Values. He describes "diversity" as an ambiguous and not necessarily positive term.

"There are probably bank robbers who are diverse, but that's not something you want to celebrate," he says.

Responds Triggs: "There are diverse used car salesmen, too." More diplomatically, Divine

says Perkins is playing with semantics and missing the point of the group: to respect and support legitimate differences between people.

Citizens Project meets the needs of its supporters on several levels. For some, it is an organization that protects constitutional freedoms. For many others, it provides a psychological buffer in a town that doesn't always embrace diverse points of view.

A woman who attended Citizens Project's general meeting at the Fine Arts Center last month was heartened to see hundreds of people streaming toward the building as if they'd been drawn there by something bigger than themselves.

"You know when the spaceship lands in the movie 'E.T.' and everybody stands there in awe?" the woman said with obvious relief. "Where you say 'Wow? I felt like, thank God there are people like me. I don't have to worry about what I'm going to say or who I'm going to say it to.'"

At another Citizens Project meeting, a man who recently moved to Colorado Springs from San Diego described how polarized life here seemed:

"I keep asking myself, 'what the hell did we get ourselves into?' My wife won't even put a bumper sticker on her car. People are afraid of people."

Divine puts it more gently: "I think there's an opportunity for healing at this point in time."

Healing, maybe. But very little sleep.

Founders kept busy with newsletter, phone calls

Triggs' and Divine's home, which houses the Citizens Project office, is rarely silent these days. There are seminars to plan, city council candidates to interview, a candidates survey to publish, the newsletter to get out and always, ringing telephones to answer.

Forty to 60 calls a day — at all hours of the day and night — pour into the office from people who want to get on the mailing

list or start their own watch dog group. (Similar groups are forming in Fort Collins and Telluride.)

Much of what Citizens Project does is research and rumor control, checking out reports about anti-gay violence or about religious literature being distributed at schools.

Much of the time the rumors have no substance, says Divine. In fact, Citizens Project spends a lot of time debunking false rumors about Christian groups, she says.

Case in point: For months a rumor had circulated that people from Focus on the Family had been calling school districts, asking for personnel lists showing marital status (or clues to sexual orientation or promiscuous behavior).

Divine says someone was calling the schools — but not someone from Focus on the Family. "It doesn't seem to be at all in their interest or their style," she says. "They're much more sophisticated than that."

Citizens Project keeps abreast of national religious right organizations such as Citizens for Excellence in Education and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum by subscribing to their literature.

Locally, a network of well-placed eyes and ears — parents, teachers and children — alert Citizens Project when they think church and state are overlapping.

Often, the word is passed by members who are active in conservative Christian churches, Divine says.

Pressed to elaborate about how religious groups are monitored, Divine laughs and says, "I'm trying to avoid the question."

She adds: "We don't have spies per se. We learn through word of mouth."

Citizens Project keeps eye on Focus on the Family

The most closely watched local groups include Colorado for Family Values, which authored and promoted Amendment

2, and Focus on the Family, an international Christian media organization based in Colorado Springs.

Although Citizens Project doesn't see eye to eye with Focus on many issues, Divine describes their relationship as "cordial."

That's an apt assessment, says Focus vice president Paul Hetrick. However, he disagrees with Divine that there's an undercurrent of intolerance in the city.

He's also frustrated by the way both the media and Citizens Project lump the city's many nonprofit Christian groups together as "the religious right."

"I think the religious right needs to be defined before there can be a discussion of monitoring taking place," Hetrick says.

Triggs and Divine define the religious right as a combination of groups that have a very conservative agenda and that use the Bible to back their political positions.

Citizens Project formed to combat 'extremists'

Citizens Project was formed last spring to combat what Triggs and Divine perceived as civil rights infringements by "local sectarians and political extremists."

They were deeply troubled by a series of events, including the removal in December 1991 of self-esteem books from the shelves of an elementary school after parents complained that it contained New Age philosophies.

In February 1992, members of a group called Cowboys for Christ objected to their children studying Greek mythology at Woodland Park High School and later sued to force the school to teach Bible-based morality. Two months later, Colorado Springs School District 11 officials received calls from "concerned Christians" who complained about gay and pagan panelists at a high school diversity conference, prompting officials to cut them from the program.

Says Divine: "It just looked like the town was getting out of

control and that a religious viewpoint was becoming overrepresented in the schools and in public policy."

She and Triggs met with 10 to 15 people and within a few weeks had a core group of 30 who helped them write a mission statement.

By May, they had compiled nearly 1,000 names, enlisted 70 volunteers and put out a four-page newsletter, "Freedom Watch." On Saturday, the newsletter, which has expanded to 12 pages, arrived in some 3,500 mailboxes around the country.

The nonprofit group, which subsists on private donations except for a \$1,200 grant from the Chinook Fund in Denver, is making the transition from a mom-and-pop operation to a more streamlined organization. There are plans to move to a downtown office sometime in the near future and hire a full-time paid staff person. There's even talk of starting an alternative newspaper at some point. Big dreams, but the money isn't there yet.

Aside from Triggs, a bankruptcy attorney, and Divine, a former television programming consultant, the group's board of directors include restaurateur Richard Skorman, Air Force Academy psychology teacher Dave Porter and Colorado College professor Bruce Loeffler, who also is a spokesman for Ground Zero, a group formed to overturn Amendment 2.

Citizens Project's steering committees monitor school curriculum, the political scene, the status of Amendment 2, the law, and the media.

The mailing list is confidential, but Divine says that about 95 percent of the group's 5,000 supporters live in Colorado Springs. Politically, the group is divided pretty evenly between independents, Democrats and Republicans, according to Divine.

When it comes to age, income, religious background and occupation, those on the mailing list are all over the map. As for ethnicity, Divine calls Citizens Project "a diverse group of white people."

Citizens Project is largely white not by design but because it was formed by word of mouth by whites. Divine says Citizens Project is making a concerted effort to reach out to the minority community by talking with minority leaders.

Critics say group out of touch with community

Others, like attorney Ken Gray, would argue that Citizens Project is operating in a vacuum and out of touch with the larger community.

Gray — who ran for state representative in District 22 against Marcy Morrison last fall and lost — says Citizens Project leaders speak in political clichés and use words like "diversity" and "religious right" to cloak their own leftist agenda.

"The opposition to the left conjures up these nightmare images. They use bombastic language, like 'evangelical ayatollahs on the right,'" says Gray, who was asked to find himself described as an anti-abortion political newsmonger in Citizens Project's first newsletter, even though he had never been contacted by the group.

Like Hetrick, he doesn't view Colorado Springs as a city torn apart by warring factions. "I think it's paranoia. To a certain extent they (Citizens Project) are people who only talk to each other," he says. "They end up with an echo chamber, to some extent."

Although Divine and Triggs say the group represents citizens from a broad spectrum of political parties and religious beliefs, others would disagree.

"Have we studied, have we looked at who Citizens Project aligns itself with?" says Amy Stephens, a human relations commissioner. "In terms of philosophy, you would easily characterize them as a radical left organization."

Douglas Triggs is incredulous at her characterization.

"Twenty years ago I might have been called a radical," he says, "but now I'm just a tired conservative."

